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THE KORAN.

IN order to understand this remarkable book, which for more than twelve centuries has been the code of law for many millions of the human race, and to estimate its influence upon the character of those who acknowledge it as the repository of religious truth, it is necessary to be acquainted with the circumstances under which it was produced. In the latter part of the sixth century, religion had almost disappeared in the thick gloom of ignorance and superstition. This was particularly the case in Arabia, where the descendants of Ishmael were idolaters, worshipping hideous images, with rites as senseless as they were barbarous, including even human sacrifices. The tribe of the Kendites buried female children alive, and by other obscure clans they were sacrificed upon their altars. The morality of such a people must have been very low, as, indeed, we know it to have been; for slavery and polygamy were recognised institutions; and some authors have accused them even of cannibalism. They do not appear to have had any notion of the immortality of the soul and of a future state; for the supposed transformation of the dead into owls, which haunted their graves, can scarcely be regarded as such.

The foreigners settled in Arabia were very numerous. Some families of fire-worshippers were scattered along the Persian Gulf, and in the south were the Sabæans, descendants of colonists from India, and image-worshippers. The Jews had emigrated to Arabia in great numbers after the destruction of Jerusalem, but the purity of their religion was lost amid the fanciful legends of the Talmud. Christianity had been established in several parts of Arabia, but so obscured was it with the worship of images and relics, and the wild and incredible legends of the saints, that it was little better than paganism. The sects into which the Christians were divided regarded each other with the most rancorous hatred; and, instead of cultivating the truth, frittered their mental energies away in discussing the questions of the digestion of the sacramental bread, and the number of angels who could stand on the point of a needle. The Collyridians deified the mother of Jesus, and made her the third person in the Trinity; and the Manicheans and Marcionites rejected the doctrine of the resurrection, taught the transmigration of the souls of evil-doers, and mingled with this spurious Christianity the Persian allegory of Ormuzd and Ahrimanes, or the conflict of the principles of good and evil.

To illuminate this gross spiritual darkness—whether among polytheists, Jews, or Christians—to extirpate the worship of images, and lead men back to the knowledge of the one True God, the author of the Koran conceived to be his especial mission. Hence he repeatedly declares, that there is but one God, eternal and omnipotent, to whom alone obedience and adoration are due; that all idolatry is sinful, and displeasing to God; that the soul is immortal; and that, at the resurrection and the final judgment, every one shall receive the reward of his good deeds or the punishment of his evil ones. To this day, the muezzin's call to prayers is the declaration that Allah is great, and there is no other god but him; and wherever the Moslems have established their power, the objects of idolatrous worship—whether from pagans or Christians—have been cast down. Indeed, his followers have carried their hostility to idolatry so far as to abstain, not only from the pictorial representation of the Deity, but from portraying the human form, because we are told in the book of Genesis that God made man in His own image. It was not until the accession of the present Sultan that the rigour of this abstinence was departed from, Abdul Medjid having sent his portrait, set in diamonds, as a present to Queen Victoria. But when the Greek churches fell into the power of the conquering Moslems, the representations of saints and martyrs on their walls were made to disappear beneath a coat of limewash.

Wishing to operate upon the entire religious world—dreaming, perhaps, of a universal pontificate—Mohammed addressed himself to the Jews and Christians, as well as to the idolaters; and the Koran contains abundant evidence of a wish to reconcile doctrinal differences, and make the Bible harmonise with the new dispensation. He was particularly desirous to make proselytes among the Jews, and frequently appeals to the Old Testament for collateral

evidence of the truth of his divine mission. With both the Bible and the Talmud he was well acquainted; for, during his journeys into Syria, previously to the proclamation of his mission as the chief and last prophet of Allah, he is said to have conversed familiarly on religious subjects with several Jews and Christians of learning and repute, among whom Abulfeda particularly mentions a famous rabbi, Abdollah Ibn Salaam, and Waraka, the nephew of his wife Khadijah, who, after deserting both the native polytheism and the Jewish creed, had embraced Christianity, and was well acquainted with both the Old and New Testaments. In order to conciliate the Jews, he directed his first disciples to pray with their faces towards Jerusalem; but when he found his advances rejected with contempt, and his pretensions derided, he instructed them to make their pious genuflexions towards Mecca.

Mohammed admitted the divine inspiration of the Old Testament, but accused the Jews of having falsified certain passages which did not agree well with his own pretensions. According to the views of divine revelation promulgated in the Koran, the will of God had been made known in succession by Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus—their respective missions rising in importance as the altered circumstances of society required a fuller revelation. Thus the authority of Abraham is greater than that of Noah, and so on in regular gradation; but Abraham was the special prototype of a true believer. "The patriarch," he says, in the second chapter of the Koran, "was neither a Jew nor a Christian, for he believed in the unity of God: he was a religious Moslem, and the friend of God; for Islamism is nothing more than the faith of Abraham." Islamism signifies entire dependence on God; and this high order of faith, which was so remarkably exemplified by Abraham, is the leading characteristic of the Moslem faith. But it was Ishmael—the father of the Arab race—who, according to the Koran, was the beloved son of the patriarch, and the chosen of God for the sacrifice; and from him Mohammed claimed descent in a direct line.

As Moses was a greater prophet, and promulgated a fuller revelation of the divine will than Abraham, so was Jesus a prophet of a higher order than Moses, and the Christian dispensation a more complete one than the Jewish. "Jesus Christ, the son of Mary, was truly the apostle of God," says the Koran; "and his words which he conveyed unto Mary, and a spirit proceeding from him, honourable in this world and in the world to come; and one of those who approach near to the presence of God. Yet Jesus was a mere mortal, and not the Son of God; his enemies conspired against his life, but a phantom was substituted for him on the cross, while he was translated to heaven." The heresies of the Eastern churches led Mohammed to charge the Christians with tritheism; and he seems to have expected their conversion, regarding the unity of God a purer doctrine than that which they held. During his lifetime they were treated with clemency and moderation, their persons and property protected, and their worship tolerated; and this wise and humane course—so different from his treatment of the Arabian pagans—was strictly in accordance with the precepts of the Koran, which says that "the prophet is nothing but a teacher and admonisher of the people, who shall not be governed by violence; the believers shall leave those who do not believe to the punishment of God, for he is the only arbiter, and will reward every one as he deserves."

Having thus briefly pointed out the extent to which Judaism and Christianity enter into the composition of Islamism, it is now necessary to notice those doctrines which are peculiar to the Moslem dispensation. As the last of the series of prophets and teachers, Mohammed takes precedence of Jesus; he is the seal of the prophecies; and with him the divine missions have ceased. The Koran is, therefore, the last revelation of God's will to man, confirming and verifying the Old and New Testaments, and setting forth the means by which salvation is to be obtained under the new dispensation. Faith and works are both necessary to insure admission into the highest heaven; but there are inferior degrees of blessedness, which may be reached by all who believe in God and have lived a life of virtue and benevolence. For idolaters there is

no hope ; their portion is the lowest pit of Jehanum—the Moslem hell. Wicked Jews and Christians, dying impenitent, are condemned to portions of the burning pit where the heat is a degree less intolerable ; and Mohammedans, of the same class, receive a little more favour as the reward of their faith. The heaven of the Moslems is eminently sensual—a paradise of odoriferous groves and pellucid streams, where the faithful enjoy the society of the dark-eyed Houris—celestial females, whose more than earthly beauty is described in the Koran in the most glowing language.

The practical duties enjoined in the Koran are : prayers at five appointed times each day, the face of the worshipper being turned towards Mecca ; frequent ablutions, Mohammed well understanding the near relation of physical and moral purity ; attendance at divine service in the mosques every Friday ; fasting during the month of Ramadan ; alms, to which the fortieth part of each person's income must be devoted ; and a pilgrimage to Mecca, if pos-

plished, and the system which he founded to have done all the good that it can do. It has outlived the time when it had a great purpose to serve, and now only exists as a protest against idolatry. The fatalism which so strongly pervades the Moslem theology, and the strictness with which the powers and duties of the Sultan are prescribed by the Koran, form an insuperable barrier to the attainment of a high degree of civilisation and the development of free institutions. Absolute predestination leads directly to individual apathy and social stagnation. The recognition of the precepts of the Koran as the only foundation of Moslem law, though it has in many instances given a check to oppression by the restrictions which it imposes on the exercise of arbitrary power, has now become an evil by fettering rulers in their efforts to promote the advance of civilisation and effect desirable reforms. This is the great difficulty which Mahmoud had to contend with, and which now clogs the progressive tendencies of his son. Reform and infi-



READING THE KORAN IN INDIA.

sible, once in the course of a person's life. Good works are much dwelt upon ; without them, prayer and fasting, though they may advance the worshipper to the portals of paradise, will not obtain him admission. Circumcision was an Arabian custom, which Mohammed retained, probably because it was also practised by the Jews. Polygamy had existed in the East from time immemorial ; the prophet merely regulated it, restricting the number of wives which a Moslem may legally have to four. Murder, adultery, perjury, and false witness, are enumerated in the Koran as deadly sins ; and usury, gaming, and the use of wine and pork, are prohibited in strict terms. Creditors are also forbidden to imprison their debtors or make slaves of them.

We have now to examine the influence of these doctrines and precepts on the character of the people among whom they have for centuries been received. Looking at its effects from the lofty point of view occupied by the Christian and the friend of social progress, the mission of Mohammed appears to be accom-

plished, and the system which he founded to have done all the good that it can do. It has outlived the time when it had a great purpose to serve, and now only exists as a protest against idolatry.

Without a change in the national faith, the progress of the Mohammedan nations must be very slow, leaving them always very far behind those of Western Europe. Whether a religious reformation is possible, would be an interesting subject for investigation. To external influences they have hitherto been inaccessible, and the experience of our missionaries seems to show that the first change must come from within ; that some point must be found in the Moslem creed itself whereon to plant the lever of progress. Islamism is not without its sects ; the Shiites, one of the two great divisions, reject the traditions, and are more tolerant and liberal than the Sunnites, or orthodox believers. Among these it is possible that some Moslem Luther may arise to reform the Mohammedan church, and give a new reading to the Koran ; after which it would be more susceptible to the influence of Christianity.